Praise and Paradox

Merchants and craftsmen in Elizabethan popular literature

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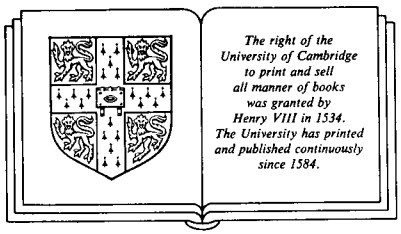

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Introduction: praise and paradox

The subjects of Elizabeth I witnessed three remarkable intellectual and social changes during their lifetimes: the flowering of English literature, the spread of literacy into the lower ranks of society, and the development and diversification of the English economy. These changes were indirectly related to one another: the prosperity some men gained from economic change was one of the factors that made the spread of literacy possible, and the demands of an increasingly literate audience encouraged Elizabethan authors to expand their literary output. Thus, at one remove, English economic change created circumstances that favoured the burst of literary talent in Elizabeth's reign; and some authors, as if grateful for the favour, returned the compliment by praising the exploits of merchants, industrialists, and craftsmen. The effect of these authors' works on later commercial expansion, exploration and colonization was, of course, indirect; but some secondary, complex connection probably did exist. For the authors who reflected upon men of trade reflected also upon the place they should have in society. They grappled with the problem of fitting men whose money came from commerce into a social structure based on the assumption that status came from land, not capital. In so doing, they pressed against the boundaries of social theory in order to create a place for what, some time later, appeared as commercial self-consciousness.

The works that praised Elizabethan merchants, craftsmen and industrialists have great potential value as guides to the social assumptions, attitudes and ambitions of sixteenth-century Englishmen. Their potential has, however, been neglected in recent years, largely because the works themselves have been thought of as 'middle-class culture' for so long that it is difficult to consider them apart from the Marxist interpretation of social history that dominated scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century.[1] Thus, the

[1] The literature was first analysed in Louis Wright's *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1935). This book remains the only thorough and serious study of the literature on merchants and craftsmen.

scholarly generation that has repudiated Marxist ideology has, by association, implicitly denied the value of 'middle-class' literature instead of asking if the literature is necessarily part and parcel of a middle class. And yet, the question is worth asking. The literature, after all, existed without the benefit of Marxist interpretation for over three hundred years before its association with the middle class was noticed; it is possible – even probable – that its essential message has been changed neither by Marxist ideology nor by the attack on the 'myth of the middle class'.[2] And there are compelling reasons for investigating this literature in the light of present scholarship in an effort to find out what its message originally was.

To begin with, the creation of this literature marked a sharp departure from earlier cultural tradition. Before Elizabeth's reign, merchants and craftsmen appeared only in negative literary contexts – in sermons condemning avarice, in estates satires exposing greed and dishonesty, and in chronicles lamenting the fickleness of the commonalty. The development of a new literature that praised the very men earlier works had maligned may have reflected a change in the way these men were viewed in society, and this change deserves investigation. Furthermore, the literature that praised merchants and craftsmen was extremely popular: tales of the heroes of trade went through edition after edition in Elizabeth's reign, and some of them remained popular for years thereafter. It seems, then, that the message of the literature (whatever it may have been) struck a responsive chord in the Elizabethan audience; it would be interesting to know why this was.

Next, the development of the new literature coincided in a suggestive way with the economic events of Elizabeth's reign. The first work in which hyperbolic praise of merchants appeared was published in 1580, a few months before the Turkey Company was formed. This kind of praise developed into a literary vogue between 1592, the year in which the Levant Company was formed, and 1600, the year in which the East India Company received its charter. During this period, 'stock' usurers in drama became benign villains rather than personifications of evil just at the time the elite was depending increasingly on the loans of London financiers. Crafts-

[2]For the attack on Marxist ideology in Tudor and Stuart studies, see J.H. Hexter, 'The Myth of the Middle Class in Tudor England' and 'Storm Over the Gentry', in *Reappraisals in History: New Views on History and Society in Early Modern Europe* (1961; rpt. New York and Evanston, 1963).

men and apprentices emerged as the heroes of plays, poems and tales during the very years the literacy of these men reached the highest point it was to attain for decades to come, and during the years when the wealthier apprentices were embarking on careers in overseas trade that would have been unthinkable two generations earlier. Any one of these incidents alone could be called coincidental, but their aggregate effect suggests there must have been a connection between the economic developments that favoured merchants and craftsmen and the popular literary vogue devoted to their contributions.

The final and most important reason for studying works praising merchants and craftsmen is a theoretical one, based on the comprehension of a much-misunderstood problem – the role of fiction in the interpretation of fact. While many historians and critics insist that fiction presents an utterly distorted portrait of historical fact, a sophisticated understanding of the relationship of the two supplies historians with a methodology that yields insight into the unspoken assumptions of a society in a way other modes of inquiry cannot.[3] The historian, spatially and temporally removed from the society he studies, does not have the anthropologist's opportunity to witness the daily intercourse of his subjects; he is thus in constant danger of missing the nuances of social expression that might reveal aspects of social thought with which he is unfamiliar. Scientific methodology, used by itself, cannot guarantee sensitive understanding of the texture of a society not one's own; demographic studies reveal only the structural patterns of society, and court cases deal principally with extraordinary and deviant social behaviour. Reading fiction, however, permits the historian to see individuals within the society he studies reflecting upon their own experience and trying to make sense of it; any historian who reads literature carefully can gain insight into both the problems that beset society and the way contemporaries viewed them. By thus investigating *how* (as opposed to *what*) people thought about religious, social, psycho-

[3]For arguments against the use of fiction in the interpretation of fact, see Lawrence Stone, 'Social Mobility in England, 1500–1700', *Past and Present*, 33 (1966), 22; Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1965), pp. 152–4, and 'The Wrong Way Through the Telescope: a Note on Literary Evidence in Sociology and Social History', *British Journal of Sociology*, 27, 3 (1976), 319–42; Paul Pickrel, 'Childhood and the English Novel', *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (November 1972), 12.

logical and moral issues, the historian can develop an understanding of the mentality of his subjects.

One of the most valuable ideas structural anthropologists have offered scholars in literature and history is that fiction is not just entertainment, but one of man's oldest ways of reflecting upon the puzzling inequities of everyday life. Given a phenomenon that defies his rational categories of explanation, Claude Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, man makes up a myth – a 'logical model' that helps him reconcile that phenomenon with his cosmology.[4] At its simplest level, a myth creates an explanation for a familiar aspect of man's life; the myth of the Fall, for example, purports to explain why women bear their children in pain and sorrow and men toil for their bread. On a more sophisticated level, however, the myth offers man a means of reconciling himself to the presence of pain in a world God has created; it also provides him with a structure that permits the exploration of the psychology of evil. As such, the myth of the Fall is much more than a primitive explanation for the phenomena of pain and toil; it is a structure for considering complex questions, one that has retained psychological influence long after man has expanded his rational categories of explanation.

Fiction is not identical with myth; a work of fiction is not necessarily written to reconcile unaccountable phenomena with the cosmos. But writing fiction, like myth-making, is a mode of thought – not logical thought that proceeds inductively or deductively to a carefully reasoned conclusion, not discursive analysis that explains events or ideas, but exploratory thought in which a problem is disclosed and considered in time, through the actions of characters. The realm of fiction, unlike that of logical or discursive thought, extends beyond the boundaries of provable truth, and this gives it a great advantage over other means of thought as a way of dealing with certain types of problems. The author who reflects upon the imaginary actions of imaginary characters can isolate various social or psychological issues – love, hate, ambition, social rivalry – from their everyday contexts and consider them without having to deal with their practical consequences. He is free to consider these issues in any frame of reference he chooses, and he can meditate upon their essential nature by imagining their possible effects on human action. Thus, a work of fiction is not just a distorted reflection *of*

[4] *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke G. Schoepf (New York and London, 1963), p. 229.

reality, but a structure that permits reflection *upon* it. It speculates upon what *could* happen if life could be shaped and controlled by ideas, instead of explaining what *does* happen because such shaping is not possible outside the realm of art.[5] This enables fiction to consider problems that may be just beyond the comprehension of men who have hundreds of concrete observations at their disposal, but no way to understand them; it offers a paradigm that may enable them to draw their observations together as parts of a conceptual whole.

Thus, the historian who is alert to the social potential of literary expression can gain insight into the assumptions of the society he studies by examining the artistic paradigms men created in order to make sense of the changes around them. By examining the language in which they formulated their paradigms, he can develop his understanding of the ideological equipment they used to solve day-to-day problems. He can comprehend not only what actions men engaged in, but the imperatives that led to these actions. And in so doing, he can add a dimension to the study of social change.

Study of the Elizabethan literature that praised merchants and craftsmen, then, sheds light upon the imperatives that lay behind Elizabethan reactions to and interpretations of social change. The paradigms created to praise men of trade illuminate the problems that change caused everyday, unspoken assumptions – before these problems were explicitly recognized, and long before they were resolved. The language in this literature shows how great were the limitations of Elizabethan social assumptions, while simultaneously revealing the power these assumptions had to shape the ideology of intelligent men who vaguely sensed their limitations. The literature thus helps historians understand the process of social development by showing them the peculiar state of consciousness that emerges when a society has outgrown an old social ideology, but has not yet formulated a new one.

This study is an exploration of the relationship of language, literary structure and social ideology in the popular Elizabethan literature that praised merchants, industrialists, and craftsmen. Chapter 1 defines a body of 'popular literature' of which the tales of tradesman heroes were a part, and it relates the development of this literature

[5] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), pp. 443–53.

to the development of the Elizabethan economy. Chapter 2 discusses the social origins and occupations of the popular Elizabethan authors; Chapter 3 relates the development of the literature to the expansion of the Elizabethan audience. The following two sections, using the methodology described above, examine the social assumptions that appeared in the praise of merchants and craftsmen.

The resulting work is far different from the one I originally intended to write, primarily because I had not expected to find that the language Elizabethan authors used to praise commercial men would be foreign to me. Such, however, was the case. For the authors did not praise merchants for their 'diligence', 'thrift', or financial talents; they praised them for being 'magnanimous', 'courtly', 'chivalric', vassals of the king. Similarly, they praised craftsmen not for their 'industry', 'sobriety', and entrepreneurial skill; they praised their 'merriment', 'good housekeeping', 'generosity', and 'obedience'. The labels Elizabethan authors attached to men of trade, in other words, reveal that they never sought to consolidate the social consciousness of these men by appealing to bourgeois values. Elizabethan praise of bourgeois men was expressed in the rhetoric – and by extension, in the terms of social paradigms – of the aristocracy.

This discovery has led me to the unexpected conclusion that social consciousness – the 'cement' that binds a group of men who pursue the same ends together – does not necessarily develop out of a new, separate system of values. In fact, it seems quite possible that a sense of social and economic cohesion precedes the development of an individual value system. I propose, then, through my study of Elizabethan popular literature, that the connection between social values and social cohesion be reconsidered. My research has persuaded me that in times of social and economic change, social fact changes more quickly than vocabulary and ideology, and so men frequently find themselves describing observations of the present in the rhetoric of the past. To dismiss this rhetoric as mere lip-service to tradition is to ignore the pain that attends social change and the confusion that attends formulation of new social ideology. In times of social change, tradition has greater psychological appeal than innovation. Before men abandon old paradigms and develop new ones that accurately describe what they observe, they strain their rhetorical concepts to the snapping point in an attempt to deny the

possible ramifications of what they see. The tension between what men really see and what they say they think they see expresses itself in paradox – in terms like 'chivalric merchant', 'gentle craftsman', and 'lordly clothier'. It is this kind of paradoxical thinking that dominates the praise of merchants, craftsmen and clothiers in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign.

In general, if paradoxical language or ideology is left to itself, it will work itself out; what fathers see through the dark glass of oxymoron, sons and grandsons may see face to face in newly formulated paradigms. On the other hand, the development of social ideology is a very delicate process, and it is easily interrupted. If new conditions arise that threaten tentative, paradoxical social observations before they can work themselves out, they simply wither. Sons, instead of (or out of fear of) investigating the potential of new social ideas, justly ridicule the clumsy language of their fathers, point out the flaws in their reasoning, and conclude that the new ideas had nothing in them, after all. This is what happened to the ideas that developed in Elizabethan popular literature. James I's accession and the 'inflation of honours' that followed it did more than devalue peerage. It drove Jacobean writers back to the medieval stereotype of the merchant as grasping usurer and status-seeker, and it encouraged them to ridicule the absurd hybrid merchant-vassals who had been so popular in the 1590s. While the sale of honour in some ways acknowledged the social changes that had occurred in Elizabeth's reign, it had the effect of halting the development of a language that could distinguish class from class and give commercial men an ideological place in the social hierarchy.

Thus the problem of the inter-relationship of money and status, which Elizabethan authors had tentatively begun to consider, did not progress beyond medieval paradigms for many years after the sixteenth-century works on merchants and craftsmen were first published. The paradoxes in Elizabethan social expression were not worked out by the sons or grandsons of the men who originally uttered them; they were resolved by men, born after the Restoration, who wrote in the early eighteenth century. The social ideology of Daniel Defoe and Sir Richard Steele is familiar to modern readers, for they discussed merchants and 'complete tradesmen' in terms of bourgeois values and gentlemen in terms of aristocratic values. They assumed that social conflict between the two groups

was fundamentally ideological. Elizabethan authors, however, had only one set of values at their disposal – aristocratic values. To them, the idea that two social groups might conflict with each other on ideological grounds was unthinkable. It is their state of mind, so nearly familiar yet so utterly foreign to the post-industrial world, that is the subject of the coming pages.